



Suriname

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 63,037 square miles, and its population is approximately 489,000. An estimated 37 percent of the population traces its ancestry to the Indian subcontinent, another 31 percent is of African descent, 15 percent claims Indonesian ancestry, and smaller percentages of the population are of Chinese, Amerindian, Portuguese, Lebanese, and Dutch extraction.

According to government estimates, 35 percent of the population is Christian, including Roman Catholic, 15 percent; Moravian, 13 percent; and other Protestant—among them Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical, Baptist, and Methodist—7 percent. Thirty percent of the population is Hindu, 24 percent identify themselves as Muslim, 8 percent follow indigenous religions, and 3 percent claim no faith. Indigenous religions are practiced by the Amerindians and the Afro-descendant Maroon populations. The Amerindians, who are principally concentrated in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism, a worship of all living things, including plants and animals, which they believe have a soul, through a medicine man, or piaiman. Maroons, who inhabit the interior, worship nature through a practice that has no special name, and they also worship their ancestors through a rite called wintie. Citizens of Amerindian and Maroon origin who classify themselves as Christian often simultaneously follow indigenous religious customs, which is known to and accepted by their Christian church leaders.

Immigrants practice faiths similar to those of native-born citizens.

Several Christian denominations, including Canadian and U.S.-based church groups, have established missionary programs throughout the country. There are an estimated 20 U.S. missionaries present, and nearly 90 percent of them are affiliated with the Baptist and Wesleyan Methodist churches.

There are approximately 150 Jews, along with small numbers of Baha'is and Buddhists. There are also other groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the World Islamic Call Society.

Many political parties have strong ethnic ties, and members tend to adhere to or practice one faith. Three out of the four governing coalition parties are ethnically based. For example, within the current governing coalition, the majority of members of the mostly Creole National Party of Suriname are Moravian, members of the mostly ethnic Indian United Reformed Party tend to be Hindu, and those of the mostly ethnic Javanese Pertjaja Luhur Party tend to be Muslim. However, parties have no requirement that political party leaders or members adhere to a particular religion.

There is no direct correlation between religious affiliation and socio-economic status; however, those who practice indigenous religions in the small villages of the interior generally have a lower socio-economic status. With the exception of those following indigenous practices, religious communities are not concentrated in any particular region of the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution contains two provisions that protect the right to worship freely. Article 18 states, "Everyone has the right of freedom of religion and philosophy of life." The Constitution also forbids religious discrimination. Article 8, Section 2 explicitly states, "No one shall be discriminated against on the grounds of birth, sex, race, language, religious origin, education, political beliefs, economic position, or any other status." Members of all faiths are allowed to worship freely.

There is no official state or otherwise dominant religion. The Government does not favor a particular religion.

The Government does not restrict the formation of political parties based on a particular faith, religious beliefs, or interpretations of religious doctrine.

There are five holy days that are celebrated as official holidays: Holi Phagwa (Hindu), Good Friday (Christian), Easter Monday (Christian), Eid al-Fitre (Muslim), and Christmas (Christian). Citizens of all faiths tend to celebrate these holidays.

The Government does not establish requirements for recognition of religious faiths, nor are religious groups required to register with the Government.

Aside from the standard requirement for an entry visa, foreign missionaries face no special restrictions.

Government leaders attend religious services during religious holidays.

Government employees are not required to take a religious oath, and they are free to display or practice any element of their faith. For example, female civil servants are allowed to wear headscarves. The national anthem asks God to be with the nation.

Adherence to a particular faith does not confer advantage in civil, political, economic, military, or other secular areas.

The military maintains a chaplaincy with a Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic priest available to personnel of all faiths. While the chaplaincy provides interfaith services, military personnel are also welcome to attend outside religious services.

The government education system provides limited subsidies to a number of public elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious organizations. While the teachers are civil servants and the schools are public, religious groups provide all funding with the exception of teachers' salaries and a small maintenance stipend. Religious instruction in public schools is permitted; however, it is not required for all students. Schools offer religious instruction in a variety of faiths.

Parents are not allowed to home school their children for religious or other reasons; however, they are allowed to enroll their children in private schools, many of which have a religious affiliation. Students in public schools are allowed to practice all elements of their faith, including wearing headscarves, crosses, or yarmulkes.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Most citizens, particularly those living in the capital of Paramaribo, celebrate to varying degrees the religious holidays of other groups.

There is an interreligious council composed of representatives of various religious groups. Council members meet once a month to discuss planned ecumenical activities and their position on government policies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintains a regular dialogue with leaders of various religious communities. In May 2005, the Embassy engaged with key Muslim leaders to clarify allegations of abuses of the Qur'an in U.S. detention facilities. In June 2005, the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation awarded a grant to support a project to preserve early Moravian church archives.

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